

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, our Advent readings shift focus, so that we are no longer pondering the second coming of Christ but are looking at the lead up to the birth of Jesus. The central figure in today's Gospel is Joseph. It is good to imagine what was happening in his life at that time if we want to appreciate how he typifies the meaning of Advent and is also a model of faith for us.

I imagine that as a young man about to get married, Joseph had mapped out a future for himself and Mary. We could say that he and Mary had a dream for their married life. It wouldn't be that they had worked out every detail, but they would have had plans, and had probably made some decisions that would shape their future. Then comes the shock. Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant. His hopes – and indeed, their hopes – seemed dashed. In an instant his future changed. He now had to think of other things. What should he do? We are told that he was a man of honour, so he decided to divorce Mary informally. This meant breaking off the engagement; but he also didn't want to make things too difficult for Mary.

But as it turned out, it wasn't quite that simple. In his dreams, he was visited by the angel of God who revealed to him the mystery around Mary's pregnancy. She had conceived what was in her by the Holy Spirit. We might ask how he could possibly have understood what this meant. Truly, it was unimaginable. He wouldn't have known how to build a future around this revelation. But the angel told him to take Mary to his home as his wife. Following this command would set him on the path to his future. Perhaps he had some small inkling that this dream was about to change everything. Eventually he might come to realise that it changed everything not just for him and Mary, but for all people, and for the world. So, he takes Mary home as his wife – and we know the rest of the story. When he finally reached this decision, he knew it was the right thing to do, so he would have felt more at ease with what was going to happen.

The future he and Mary had was far bigger than anything he could have planned or anticipated. It is as though each time his plans were re-shaped, his life expanded. What would have probably been a quiet life in a small town ended up being a life that participated in the re-shaping of the destiny of the world. The angel had told Joseph that the child that Mary would give birth to

would save his people from their sins. In other words, this child would turn around their lives, and give them a new life.

Joseph is a powerful reminder of the meaning of Advent. Throughout these weeks of Advent, the Bible readings have invited us to look to the future and to prepare for it. Today's story of Joseph shows us how to do this. It is important to recognise that God entered into Joseph's life at the very time and place where he faced problems and had to make a decision. God took the initiative with Joseph, but Joseph was ready to embrace the path that God was opening up for him. In an important way, Joseph anticipates what we are all called to, namely faith in Jesus – faith that he will change our lives and transform the world.

The annunciation to Joseph gives us some important lessons about how to live as God's people. The first lesson is to be ready for God to "visit" us. God can reveal his will to us when we least expect it. God visited Joseph when he was not expecting it, when he faced a difficult decision, and when all his plans were threatened. Those times when we feel challenged or when things are difficult or when we need to make decisions can also be the times to be alert to God in our lives.

A second lesson is that God may upset our plans. God may call us to do something we thought we could never do. The lesson from Joseph is that even if God calls us to do something that seems too difficult, we will always receive the grace to respond and to do what God wants. God will be offering us more than we had hoped for.

A third lesson is that our response to God's intervention in our lives is an act of faith. Joseph is a witness to that. Faith is about trust in God. However, true trust in God requires that we be confident that what we think we are being asked to do is truly of God. In the case of Joseph, he had made a few different sets of plans, before he finally discerned the true will of God in the message of an angel. This is what he followed.

Over the coming week we make our final preparation for Christmas. May this preparation help us to be ready for the many ways that God touches our lives. God may even alter our plans.